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ABSTRACT

A writing exchange project at Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College in Vermont, funded by Apple Education Foundation and McDonnell Douglas, examined what happened when high school students use word processors and a modem to write to distant audiences. In the first exchange, students interviewed each other in pairs and wrote short biographies of the person they interviewed. In the second exchange, students worked in small groups to describe their school and community. Writing to a distant audience motivated students to pay more attention to what they wrote as well as how they said it. Students exchanging writing with outside, interested readers broaden the context in which they write, learn about life outside their own communities, and reflect on themselves. (MS)

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Sharing Writing on an Electronic Network

Jeffrey Schwartz
11/11/86

When you walk by the computer room at Sewickley Academy, chances are you'll see more English students than computer scientists hunched over their machines. Along one wall is a map of the US and a six-foot-long, computer-printed banner proclaiming THE MONTANA PENNSYLVANIA EXPRESS. Along another wall is a bulletin board of student writing and picture post cards from Wilsall, Montana, a small ranching commmunity north of Yellowstone Park. If you're there on the day we receive messages from Wilsall, you'll see a group of students huddled around one of the computers connected to a small, rectangular box, which in turn is connected to a phone outlet on the wall. The students are reading messages on the screen whirring by in green type. Minutes before, those messages could have been typed in Montana, then sent to us via the modem, the phone lines, and a mail service that collects and sorts messages like an electronic post office.

Two summers ago at the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College in Vermont, I planned a writing exchange with Joanne Tulonen, the teacher in Wilsall. We were both part of a larger project at Bread Loaf funded by Apple Education Foundation and McDonnell Douglas to look at what happens when high school students use word processors and a modem to write to distant audiences. Along with other teachers connected electronically in states from Alaska to South Carolina and Maine to New Mexico, we've been finding that students love to write on the word processors, that it makes revising easier and more fun, and that when they exchange messages with other students, they learn how to write in a real context. Their audience is no longer exclusively their teacher, or even their class, and they don't

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have to imagine hypothetically what it would be like to describe themselves or their school to kids from a geographically distant place.

Instead, when they wrote to Montana, my students had to learn to anticipate a real reader. They had to evaluate what their readers knew or didn't know, and they had to deal sensitively with their stereotypes of kids so very different from them. While the students in Wilsall were the same age as the ones in Sewickley and had similar interests in sports, music, and parties, they were fundamentally different too. In Montana, the kids go to a public school of only 38 students, where team sports are limited to basketball and where in their spare time they go camping in the Rockies, rope steer, hunt elk and coyote, and compete at 4-H. Sewickley kids, on the other hand, attend a private school of about 200 mostly advantaged kids, play soccer and lacrosse, hike the Alleghenies, have access to a large city with its pro sports teams, symphony, art museum, playhouses, and shopping, and if they hunt at all, go for pheasant and deer.

The exciting part of our electronic exchanges was sharing lifestyles. Kids are naturally curious about life in other places, but rarely have a chance to know another place outside of reading, relatives, and short vacations. Differences in lifestyles could have been found locally too, but the lure of long distance and the way the computers closed that 2000-mile gap motivated students to write. The exchanges gave them an opportunity they never would have had to cross cultures economically and geographically, to find out how others live, and then to imagine themselves as others see them.

In the first exchange, students interviewed each other in pairs and

wrote short biographies of the person they interviewed. Because they were strangers at this point, students hadn't developed a sense of their audience. This showed especially when they gave the reader obvious information, like "Sue [all student names have been changed] attends Sewickley Academy and is presently a senior," or when their opening paragraphs were stiff and predictable, "Chris is a seventeen year old student who was born in Pittsburgh and lived there all of his life. This school year, Chris started as a senior at Sewickley Academy where he has been attending school since ninth grade. Before his freshman year, however, he attended a public school in the Pittsburgh area." Many of the biographies follow a predictable list of name, birthdate, family size, interests, and goals.

Not all of them sound like Who's Who entries though. There were some great stories about a camping mishap at Fairy Canyon and another about dressing up as a fashion model in a chic Pittsburgh shopping strip. We were beginning to crack through to the special differences between us. In this excerpt, the writer had to slow down and explain calf roping to a bunch of city slickers:

> Calf roping is a one man event. When the calf is released, the roper can chase after it, but he can't "break out" before the calf does. After the roper ropes the calf around its head, his horse will stop and back up, pulling the rope tight as he dismounts. The calf must then be thrown, "flanked," by the roper, who will commence to tie any three legs together with a short piece of rope called a "piggin' string," thus ending the event.

In the second exchange, students worked in small groups to describe their school and community. By then we had read about life in Wilsall, and students could incorporate that information into their writing. One pair of writers, after considering that their audience wouldn't be as interested as

they were in "European clothes in stores such as Gucci, Benneton or Yves St. Tropez" added descriptions of Kaufman's, Gimbel's, and Hornes--Pittsburgh's biggest department stores. Another group, who always saw Sewickley Academy as a tiny school in Pittsburgh, revised their descriptions in light of the size of Wilsall to acknowledge that "although Sewickley Academy Senior School may be considered quite large by your standards, it is relatively small in comparison with many surrounding schools."

Here is one vision of Pittsburgh compared to life on a western ranch:

> If you decide to tough it out and fight the traffic, you will soon find yourself crossing a bridge and entering into Pittsburgh. The streets are covered with detour and men at work signs. Pittsburgh is in the process of a face lift, known as Renaissance II. According to a national survey we are considered the number one city in the nation. Unfortunately no other city even knows the poll was taken. The city is putting a subway in, but right now it only runs from Pittsburgh to the South Hills; the rest of us (North Hills) have to go without it for now.
>
> Pittsburgh may be known for its unemployment and steel mills, but there are other things in the city. We have our own ballet company and symphony. Carnegie Museum has a multitude of exhibitions, such as an art gallery, dinosaur hall, and a natural history section....

* * * *

and from Wilsall:

> The main occupation of this community is ranching. We ourselves are ranchers. The last couple of years haven't been so good for beef and grain prices. Most of the people around this area are hurting because lack of funds....
>
> Taking care of cows is a year around job for the rancher. After you wean the calves from their mothers you have to start feeding them. This is usually twice a day for the calves and once for the cows. No matter how cold the weather they still have to be fed. One of the jobs when calving comes around is to keep a close watch on the ones that are about to calve especially the two year old heifers which are having their first calf because sometimes you may have to pull them. If you have to do this, it usually means that the calf is to big for the heifer or it is backwards, so you must help her. If the feet aren't showing you must reach inside of her and find the feet. Then you have to attach a chain to the feet and start pulling until the calf is totally out.

That description of pulling a calf provoked a huge reaction on our end. Nobody had ever witnessed such a thing. Our descriptions of tack shops,

tanning salons, the Steelers, and the Pittsburgh ballet must have seemed as distant as what we read about calf pulling, Chico's Hot Springs, and Nordie's Dry Goods Grocery.

The third exchange was much looser, and showed students joking around for the first time. The stereotypes that earlier were repressed or had inadvertantly slipped out were now deflected through humor. These informal responses, openly satirical of themselves and each other, show a much more intimate relationship with their readers than the first exchanges did. Students have relaxed into their own voices, and their messages show a more sophisticated awareness about how they project themselves to a distant reader.

> When you read our descriptions, no doubt you found many differences between our way of life and yours. However, there are quite a few similarities. The biggest similarity must be the worldwide activity of partying.
>
> We have heard of the Pittsburgh Steelers (we saw them on the community T.V.).
>
> According to a recent poll, Wilsall was rated the #1 city in the country (due to lack of funds, the poll was not conducted in Pennsylvania).
>
> Until we received your letters, we thought that Gucci was what you say to a baby when you tickle him under his chin....
>
> Yours till the kitchen sinks,

* * * *

> I told my brother Biff, and my other brother Skip, and Muffy my sister and Mums, about how none of you had heard of Gucci. They were so sympathetic that they have organized a relief fund-- Aid for Gucci. To raise money, everyone at the school here has donated all their old pink shirts, light green skirts, khaki slacks, Izod jerseys, scarfs, Bluchers (the preppie shoe), and old lacrosse sticks. But we couldn't donate any socks because no one here has seen a pair since that cold winter in '76....
>
> Yours when you see the light and not before,

Some of the other messages in this more intimate third exchange invited kids from the other end to visit. One group of writers even more boldly wrote, "We don't really know how to break this to you, but a few of us would like

to come down and meet you and your city in person." All of those green letters passing back and forth across computer screens had bound the kids together in a shared experience they wanted to extend.

Writing to a distant audience got students to pay more attention to what they wrote as well as how they said it. They would return to their computer screens many times to make changes in their drafts so that they "wouldn't sound stupid" to their readers, something they were much more conscious of writing to Montana, than they were when I was the only reader. While they learned about telecommunications and life in other places, the primary purpose of the course was to sharpen writing skills. In between sending messages, we looked closely at how students got an idea, and then, with an outside reader in mind, how they gathered and selected information, how they organized it into a draft, and how they revised and edited before sending off their final version.

In order for our project to work, the other teacher and I needed to work closely and to incorporate the electronic exchanges into the curriculum of the whole course. Computers also had to be available on a regular basis, and a fairly strict, but flexible schedule had to be worked out ahead of time between us. We found that we had to have a plan that kids could count on, but at the same time we had to allow for technical difficulties and schedule conflicts that inevitably got in the way. We knew from experience that if we created expectations and then the school on the other end didn't come through, we'd lose student interest. We also knew that the thrill of a pen pal type of exchange would fade quickly if students didn't have additional reasons to write. In addition to writing letters back and forth, students wrote and rewrote informative essays addressed to the whole class.

Our assignments were chosen to get students thinking about themselves and their differences. We used obvious ones on autobiography, school, and community, but there are countless possiblities. Students ended up writing about music, jobs, classes, hangouts, family, travels, and the future. Other schools in our network are co-investigating common issues (like local American Indian history), conducting oral histories, and sharing responses to literature. We have also sent students' best writing to what may be the first national electronic magazine. Last spring at each of the schools in the network, students learned to be magazine editors, selecting and critiquing writing from their school, and then forwarded the best pieces to a central editorial board at Sewickley. As they received writing via modem or disk, the editors at Sewickley chose the best writing and designed a publication called Voices Across the Wires, which was eventually published and sold at the Bread Loaf School of English to teachers from all over the US.

As using microcomputers in the writing class becomes more widespread, teachers may want to experiment with telecommunications. One advantage of telecommunications over regular US mail is that it is faster. This year I've found that messages are read between 5 minutes and 4 days after they're sent, with an average of about 24 hours in between. Using the computer to send mail also is more motivating to students than sending conventional mail. The idea of being linked instantly across 2000 miles suddenly changes students' conception of distance and the size of their world. They're no longer geographically or culturally isolated. With the touch of a few keys on their Apple, they can be connected to people and cultures they never would have met. The computer is also a common bond between the students at

each end. Since they are already using the technology to write and revise their letters and essays, using a modem is only an extension of the technology available to them. They see the computer in the best sense as a tool for learning, and they get excited about trying out a technological tool they can bet to see in their futures.

One of the problems with using new technology, though, is that it costs money. In addition to the computers themselves, you need a modem, communications software, a phone line in the room, and a mail service. I was lucky that my school had all of those, except the mail service, which was covered by a grant to Bread Loaf from McDonnell Douglas. If funds are available, electronic exchanges can be arranged through the Source, CompuServe, or Delphi, the three most popular mail services, which also include electronic conferencing and data bases of all sorts, from lists of restaurants to Dow Jones.

If funds aren't available, there are still ways to exchange writing with other schools. Without a computer, mailing writing is the easiest. There are a lot of advantages of using disks, however, which can be mailed easily between two pieces of cardboard. Last year, my class also traded disks with a small school in Minnesota, and because we sent them a disk, their whole class responded on it to each of our messages before mailing it back. Though that method is not as immediate or as exciting as seeing the messages flee across the screen, it is technically less risky. No matter how it is done, students exchanging writing with outside, interested readers broadens the context in which they write. It teaches them about life outside their own communities, and gets them to reflect on themselves.